History Program Assessment Comments

Spring 2013

The Interim Assessment submitted by the History Program at Trinity Washington University contains a great deal of information regarding the program’s plan to collect data. The program, which houses both a major and a minor, offers a wide variety of classes, ranging from introductory to more specialized classes. The various classes within the program appear to align with the goals and objectives as defined by the history program. These goals and objectives also align to the stated goals and objectives of the College of Arts and Sciences.

The report details how assessment will be completed in four courses offered by the program, three 100 level general education courses and one upper level (300 level) class, presumably taken mostly by majors in history or associated disciplines such as Political Science or International Relations. This selection of classes does skew the results of assessment towards classes that do a double function as introductory history classes for major while still satisfying requirements in the general education curriculum. If the program plans to assess how the classes are serving majors, and whether or not the students in the major program are progressing to more and more complex skills and deeper critical thinking, perhaps a 200 level class could be added to the mix. This would create a more graduated assessment instrument. It might also be suggested that perhaps the assessment of four classes is a bit too ambitious. Given that the program only has three full time faculty members, one of whom is retiring at the end of the Spring 2014 semester, perhaps the program should narrow the scope of their assessment. For example, three classes in total (a 100 level class, a 200 level class and one upper level) would probably provide an appropriate amount of data without over burdening any one member of faculty. It would also allow for the creation of a more nuanced look at how students in the major program learn over time to meet the desired outcomes.

The report has been divided into sections explaining how each of the four courses will be assessed. The initial section provides a discussion of how the individual goals of the program are tied to each class. The report then describes how these goals are to be assessed in the various assignments and explains how data will be captured using instruments such as rubrics, intake/outtake assessments, etc. Many of these skill-based goals are covered in the materials, such as clear, concise writing, the ability to develop a thesis and learning to complete historical research. The various assignments also appear to build these skills over time. The description of assignments explains how the level of assessment changes during the semester to capture whether or not students have mastered skills and are ready to move on to the next level. This area of the report is well organized and explained. There is a clear plan for assessing each class and an explanation of how data will be collected. As the plan reviewed is dated 2011, it is assumed that the program has been continuing to collect information from these frequently taught classes, which can be used to strengthen the connection between the data collected and the reporting of student outcomes, which should be contained in the final report.

One important part of the report is the sections showing how assessment has provoked rethinking of various elements of the classes. The understanding of student needs obviously leads to changing course structures to address these issues. While this is an interim report, the inclusion of how these needs were addressed and an assessment of whether or not these changes had a positive impact are important to the final report. One of the areas of potential improvement in student learning pointed out is the difficulty students have in finding appropriate source materials. Not addressed in the report is how the faculty has worked to solve this issue. Again, as the dating on the report is several years old, there have undoubtedly been changes over time to incorporate this type of materials, such as teaching library skills, etc. One area not really discussed is the use of technology and teaching students to use technology to solve these problems (other than making powerpoints available via Moodle). It is not clear exactly how the acquisition of this skill would be measured.

In conclusion, the report by the History Program highlights many elements of continuing assessment of their classes and the needs of their students. The report presents a clear idea of the expected outcomes for student learning. A detailed plan for assessing each of the four classes are laid out, and the faculty are experienced is using the instruments to ascertain whether or not these outcomes have been achieved. In all cases, the goals of the selected classes clearly align to the goals of the program, which in turn align with the goals of the College of Arts and Sciences. The History Program has outlined a clear skill set for the students in their classes, and a plan for how to assess whether or not students have synthesized the information. While there are a few suggestions included here, the materials presented here seem to be a positive presentation of academic assessment, It is, in my opinion, a complete and thorough report, which only needs to be updated to include more current data for the classes that are offered on a regular basis.